



China's Participation in Conflict Resolution in the Middle East and North Africa: A Case of Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy?

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ABSTRACT

'Quasi-mediation diplomacy' refers to the role a 'mediating' state plays in international activities to defend its commercial, political and diplomatic interests rather than core security and strategic interests. This type of mediator acts without seeking to dominate; to follow rather than to lead; to partake in the revision of the agenda rather than setting it; and, to encourage conflict de-escalation in lieu of determinedly engaging in conflict resolution. The dynamics of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) depend on their relevance to China's vital commercial interests, the scope of China's influence, the level of the great powers' consensus and the intractability of crisis settlement. Through a comprehensive interchange of the above-mentioned variables, China-styled quasi-mediation diplomacy rests on risk-aversion, revealing divergent forms which can be categorized at four levels, namely, multifaceted intervention, proactive involvement, limited intercession and indirect participation. These four categories of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy shed light on China's discreet participation in the MENA conflict resolutions.

Introduction

Although China has not engaged in meaningful mediation diplomacy in the MENA, it is important to explain what mediation diplomacy is. Historically, mediation diplomacy has been an essential instrument for sovereign states, regional entities and international organizations to participate in global governance, enhance political influence and facilitate relations with other major powers. Since the outbreak of the first Middle East war in 1948, the US, Western European powers, the Soviet Union/Russia, the League of Arab States, the Organization of African Unity (1963–2002/African Union 2002–) and the United Nations have all engaged in the settlement of the thorny MENA disputes, and expanded their political influence through political intervention and participation in the MENA regional governance. For example, in the wake of the fourth Arab–Israeli war in 1973, Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy enabled the US to gain the upper hand in its rivalry with the USSR.¹ Thus, mediation diplomacy can be an important tool for international actors to increase agenda-setting capability for political influence. Since the early twenty-first century, international actors have utilized their respective mediation diplomacy in various forms and substance in the MENA as a tool of security governance for the region and soft balance against external competitors. But, China's intercession in the resolution of conflicts in the

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¹See William B. Quandt, *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab–Israeli Conflict since 1967*, 3rd edn (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press and the University of California Press, 2005).

MENA is a relatively recent phenomenon. This intercession has not been automatic, or even substantive, but pragmatic. Indeed, China reacts selectively and cautiously to different events according to what its policymakers consider to be of either vital or secondary interest. This also depends on their perception of the international context at a given moment and whether it would be opportune to intervene. In spite of its increased interest in the MENA and some political involvement, China has yet to engage in authentic mediation diplomacy.

Even if China's involvement in the MENA conflicts is not tantamount to genuine mediation, defining first what mediation is can help in demonstrating that China's efforts in such endeavors may constitute the necessary learning tools to play in the future an effective mediation role in the MENA, should it choose to do so.

Mediation, an inter-disciplinary concept, has been applied in the fields of psychology, sociology, economics, management, law, diplomacy and political science.² This article retains the definition of mediation as a third-party intervention in conflicts with non-coercive and neutral ways through peaceful management and behavior to address a conflict whose direct outcome is the transformation of bilateral relations into trilateral ones.³ International academic research on the subject in the field of mediation can be divided into four schools.

The first school examines the concept of mediation; its adherents pay close attention to the nuance among 'good office', 'conciliation', 'mediation', 'arbitration' and 'consultation';⁴ the research results of this category include mainly the works and articles of scholars who seek to determine definitions, categories, motivations, mechanisms and performance, using qualitative and quantitative methods.⁵

The second school is concerned primarily with mediation cases conducted not only by international organizations, such as the United Nations, but also by countries, such as the US, Algeria, Oman and Qatar. The publications of those case studies have usually embraced the historical approach.⁶

The third school examines mediation from the perspective of diplomacy positing that mediation serves as an instrument of crisis management and conflict prevention through third-party intervention.⁷

The fourth school is essentially Chinese-centered; scholars and practitioners in this school scrutinize China's contemporary diplomacy, incorporating the roles of the special envoys and the mechanism of

²See Carrie Menkel-Meadow, Lela Porter Love and Andrea Kupfer Schneider, *Mediation: Practice, Policy, and Ethics* (New York: ASPEN, 2006).

³Hugh Miall, Tom Woodhouse, Oliver Ramsbotham and Christopher Mitchell, *The Contemporary Conflict Resolution Reader* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2015); Jacob Bercovitch, ed., *Studies in International Mediation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

⁴Kenneth Kressel and Dean G. Pruitt, *Mediation Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1989); Asaf Siniver, 'Power, impartiality, and timing: three hypotheses on third party mediation in the Middle East', *Political Studies* 54(4), (2006), pp. 806–826; Christopher W. Moore, *The Mediation Process—Practical Strategies for Resolving Conflict*, 4th edn (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2014). Moore defines mediation as 'the intervention in a standard negotiation or conflict of an acceptable third party who has limited or no authoritative decision-making power but who assists the involved parties in voluntarily reaching a mutually acceptable settlement of issues in dispute' (p. 15).

⁵Of the many works in this school, see, Siniša Vuković, *International Multiparty Mediation and Conflict Management: Challenges of Cooperation and Coordination* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016); Jacob Bercovitch and Scott Sigmund Gartner, eds, *International Conflict Mediation: New Approaches and Findings* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009); Eileen Carroll and Karl Machie, *International Mediation—The Art of Business Diplomacy* (The Hague, London and Boston: Kluwer Law International, 2000); Menkel-Meadow et al., *Mediation*; Carrie Menkel-Meadow, ed., *Mediation: Theory, Policy and Practice* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

⁶See Elodie Convergne, 'Learning to mediate? The mediation support unit and the production of expertise by the UN', *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding* 10(2), (2016), pp. 181–199; J. Michael Greig, Paul Francis and Paul F. Diehl, *International Mediation* (Cambridge: Polity, 2012); Jeffrey Z. Rubin, *Dynamics of Third Party Intervention: Kissinger in the Middle East* (New York: Praeger, 1981); Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, 'Qatar's Mediation Initiatives', Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Center (NOREF), (February 2013), available at: <https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/160109/da1df25567ebd34af26d634892934b03.pdf> (accessed 22 September 2017); 丁隆&赵元昊 [Long Ding and Yuanhao Zhao], '卡塔尔的外交策及其实践' [Qatari foreign policy and practice], *阿拉伯世界研究 [Journal of Arab World Studies]* 1, (2010), p. 9.

⁷See Dwight Golann and Jay Folberg, *Mediation: The Roles of Advocate and Neutral* (New York: Wolters Kluwer, 2016); Sid Rashid, 'Preventive diplomacy, mediation and the responsibility to protect in Libya: a missed opportunity for Canada?', *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 19(1), (2013), pp. 39–52; Michael Greig and Patrick M. Regan, 'When do they say yes? An analysis of willingness to offer and accept mediation in civil wars', *International Studies Quarterly* 52(4), (2008), pp. 759–781; Francois Debrix, *Rituals of Mediation: International Politics and Social Meaning* (New York: University of Minnesota Press, 2003).

such actions. They have focused their work mostly on China's security governance in the MENA affairs through bilateral and multilateral processes.⁸ The approach in this article seeks to contribute further to the work developed by this school in order to scrutinize further the factors which drive China's diplomatic moves in the MENA's conflict resolution processes.

The current academic research on mediation has evolved at different levels and, in spite of the interest it has elicited, the research on mediation suffers from a number of weaknesses. One of the serious weaknesses is pertinent to the analysis in this article in that the current literature tends to focus on the 'standard' mediations that developed countries have conducted. A number of mediations undertaken by developing countries, such as China, Qatar and Algeria, or international organizations like the League of Arab States and the African Union, are ignored. An examination of the different studies shows that Beijing's conflict resolution in the MENA has attracted limited interest. In spite of the publicity surrounding it, China's special envoys are not entrusted with mediation roles as are those from other major powers.

From Mediation Diplomacy to Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy: A Conceptual Differentiation

As a form of peacemaking, the concept of mediation refers to 'a form of third-party intervention in conflict for the purpose of abating or resolving that conflict through negotiation'.⁹ Mediation diplomacy, as an alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanism, requires that a number of conditions be fulfilled. Firstly, the players should be either sovereign states or international organizations. Secondly, the mediator should engage willingly to settle the crisis and disputes. Thirdly, the mediating party offers to intervene in a given conflict and, while building trust with the conflicting parties, proposes tradeoffs based on peaceful means as an alternative to continued conflict rather than coercive methods which the mediator cannot impose anyway as this would be antithetical to the principle of mediation. Accordingly, the objective of the mediator is to attempt to persuade the conflicting parties to use peaceful means to avoid resorting to military conflict. Fourthly, the mediator must obviously be impartial to maintain the trust of the conflicting parties. Mediation diplomacy turns the adversarial, two-party zero-sum game into a three-party win-win cooperation in conflict management, i.e. transforming the bilateral dispute into trilateral interaction and cooperation, converting security competition into political compromise, and, finally, changing competitive international politics into cooperative interstate political interaction. Mediation diplomacy is a discrete kind of diplomacy including the diplomatic endeavor and peacemaking performance (peace undertaking) with necessary economic aid. It aims at bringing the conflicting parties together with the hope of getting them to reach agreement.

Mediation diplomacy usually needs to be supported by powerful actors, such as, for instance, US intercession between Egypt and Israel after the 1973 October War which ultimately resulted in the Camp David Accords of 1979.¹⁰ Yet, smaller powers may take advantage of their credibility in the eyes of the conflicting parties to reach tangible results. For example, when the US and Iran were at odds following

⁸See Chris Alden and Ana Cristina Alves, 'China's regional forum diplomacy in the developing world: socialisation and the "sinosphere"', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(103), (2017), pp. 151–165; 孙德刚 [Sun Degang], '中国在中东开展斡旋外交的动因分析', ['On the dynamics of China's mediation diplomacy in the Middle East'], *国际展望 [Global Review]* 37(6), (2012), pp. 14–31; Sun Degang, 'China and the Middle East security governance in the new era', *Contemporary Arab Affairs* 10(3), (2017), pp. 354–371; Mordechai Chaziza and Ogen Shlomo Goldman, 'What factors increase the probability of Chinese interventions in intrastate wars?', *Asian Journal of Political Science* 24(1), (2016), pp. 1–20; Yitzhak Shichor, 'Fundamentally unacceptable yet occasionally unavoidable: China's options on external intervention in the Middle East', *China Report* 49(1), (2013), pp. 25–41.

⁹Saadia Touval and I. William Zartman, 'Introduction: mediation in theory', in Saadia Touval and I. William Zartman, eds, *International Mediation in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO and London: Westview Press, 1985), p. 7.

¹⁰Kenneth W. Stein, *Heroic Diplomacy: Sadat, Kissinger, Carter, Begin and the Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 228.

Iran's Islamic Revolution in 1979, Algeria played a successful mediation role,¹¹ resulting in the liberation in 1981 of 52 American hostages after 444 days in captivity, while positively improving the image of Algeria, a country considered hitherto as radical and anti-US because of its anti-imperialist posture.¹²

In August 2003, dealing with a major issue in its immediate neighborhood, China set in place the six-party talk mechanism to address the North Korean nuclear issue whose objective was not only to preserve China's core sovereign and security interests, but also to demonstrate Beijing's active mediation diplomacy in its vicinity.¹³ But, as shall be seen and as this research shows, China's involvement in the MENA has not translated into the formulation of mediation diplomacy as defined above; at best, China conducts calculated quasi-mediation which helps it achieve some of its policy goals without having to get deeply involved in mediation.

In this article 'quasi-mediation diplomacy' is defined as a cautious approach to conflict resolution whereby the would-be third-party actor willingly participates but does not play a consequential role in the mediation process. As table 1 shows, quasi-mediation diplomacy aims to defend the mediator's commercial, political and diplomatic interests rather than security and strategic interests; the mediator chooses to participate rather than dominate; to follow instead of leading; to put forth constructive ideas rather than set agendas; to encourage conflict de-escalation as opposed to conflict resolution. In this case, the would-be mediator refrains, often deliberately, from playing a central role because the resolution of the conflict serves only some limited interests. In other cases, the quasi-mediator will step into a conflict situation when rival powers have abstained from engaging in mediation owing to the high cost of the internal conflict, like in Sudan or in South Sudan, but where its own interests are more crucial.

China's Involvement in the Conflict Resolution of the MENA

Different from US alliance politics in the MENA, China has, since the close of the 1970s, remained fairly neutral in MENA conflicts. In 1979, China initiated its reform and opening-up policy, and substituted economic diplomacy for Mao Zedong's revolutionary diplomacy. That same year, the People's Republic of China established diplomatic relations with the US, while Iran broke off diplomatic ties with Washington. China sought a balanced policy between Iran and the US on the one hand, and between Iran and Iraq on the other hand. In the UN Security Council Resolution vote condemning Iran's kidnapping of US hostages, China abstained in order to avoid offending both 'revolutionary' Iran and the 'hegemonic' US. On the Iran–Iraq war, China voted in favor of UN Security Council Resolution 479 on 28 September 1980. Although Iran expressed dissatisfaction with the Resolution, complaining that it had blurred the difference between aggressive Iraq and defensive Iran, China supported the consensus in the Security Council refraining from criticizing Iraq as the 'invader'. During his talk with Odvar Nordli, Prime Minister of Norway on 25 September 1980, Mao's successor, Deng Xiaoping, expressed deep concern about the Iran–Iraq war, urging both Tehran and Baghdad to settle their dispute through peaceful dialogue and to avoid an escalation of conflict.¹⁴

¹¹See Gary Sick, 'The partial negotiator: Algeria and the US hostages in Iran', in Touval and Zartman, eds, *International Mediation in Theory and Practice*, pp. 29–30; Boussetta Allouche, *Small States and International Mediation: The Case of Algeria* (Algiers: Office des Publications Universitaires, 1989); Randa M. Slim, 'Small-state mediation in international relations: the Algerian mediation of the Iranian hostage crisis', in Jacob Bercovitch and Jeffrey Z. Rubin, eds, *Mediation in International Relations: Multiple Approaches to Conflict Management* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1992); Juillard Patrick, 'Le rôle joué par la République populaire et démocratique d'Algérie dans le règlement du contentieux entre les États-Unis d'Amérique et la République islamique d'Iran' ['The role played by the popular and democratic Republic of Algeria in the conflict between the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran'], *Annuaire français de droit international* 27, (1981), pp. 19–44.

¹²On US–Algerian relations, see Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The United States and Algeria: hostility, pragmatism, and partnership', in Robert Looney, ed., *Handbook on US Middle East Relations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2009), pp. 219–236.

¹³Cheng (Jason) Qian and Xiaohui (Anne) Wu, 'The art of China's mediation during the nuclear crisis on the Korean Peninsula', *Asian Affairs* 36(2), (2009), pp. 79–96.

¹⁴华黎明 [Hua Liming], '新中国与伊朗关系六十年' ['Six decades of the PRC–Iran relations'], 西亚非洲 [Journal of West Asia and Africa] no. 4, (2010), p. 25.

China was reluctant to mediate between Iran and Iraq unilaterally; it voted for UNSC Resolution 598 on 20 July 1987 and for Resolution 619 on 9 August 1988. The Security Council reached consensus on ending the war and urged the two sides to accept UN mediation. Unlike other outside powers, China did not side with either Iran or Iraq, and neither did it seek to play a mediation role. Seeing the conflict as a proxy war between the US and the USSR, Deng Xiaoping made clear during his meeting on 29 May 1984 with Joao Figueiredo, President of Brazil, that 'China's foreign policy is based on self-independence which is real nonalignment. China will not play the US card, nor the Soviet card'.¹⁵

China refrained from genuine mediation because that posture justified its lucrative arms sales to the two warring states. Indeed, China was one of the main suppliers of arms to both Iran and Iraq. When hostilities broke out, Iraq purchased about 2000 Type-69 Medium Tanks and 80 J-7 aircraft. These weapons were used to counterbalance Iran's US-made F-4s, F-5s and F-14s. The Chinese J-7 was comparable to the Soviet MiG-17 in performance, but the cost was much lower. Meanwhile, China sold J-7BI and J-7N aircraft as well as Silkworm missiles to Iran; subsequently, it remained Iran's second largest supplier of arms. From 1982 to 1991, Iran purchased about US\$3.8 billion worth of weapons from China.¹⁶ Arms sales became one of the most profitable industries in China. For instance, from 1980 to 1988, Baotou No. 1 Arsenal Factory (617 Arsenal Factory) gained a net profit of US\$1 billion in arms trade with Iran and Iraq, which was of great importance to China during its early stage of reform and opening-up policy.¹⁷

Since the end of the Cold War, China, in fact, has exploited three periods of strategic opportunity that stretch from the demise of the Soviet Union in 1991, the 9/11 terrorist attacks in 2001 and the Arab uprisings since 2010.¹⁸ The three periods have invariably started and ended with important clashes between the West and the MENA countries. China's determination to continue the rapid economic and social development it had begun in the last three decades enabled the country to partly exploit those three strategic periods which, undoubtedly, opened great opportunities to further China's interests.

Because of the continued growth of its international status and the steady expansion of its overseas interests, the MENA has progressively, and inevitably, become the converging point of China's 'Belt and Road Initiative' (BRI). Participation, albeit guarded, in the settlement of the MENA urgent issues has, therefore, become an important, clever means for Beijing to safeguard its national interests and, at the same time, expand unassumingly its political influence. While China's interests in the MENA are driven primarily by energy necessities, they also hinge on Beijing's declared 'zero-enemy policy', which consists in purportedly expanding amicable, multidimensional cooperation and relations of mutual understanding and trust with all countries in the region. This strategy presupposes that China maintain a degree of neutrality and evenhandedness in conflicts among Middle Eastern states,¹⁹ without having to get too deeply involved in either substantive mediation or interference.

One can even argue that in strategic terms, the MENA is becoming even more crucial to Beijing than it is to Washington, for the MENA is the core from which China can cooperate and/or compete with other great powers, and is directly relevant to China's post-Cold War strategic opportunities.²⁰ Under BRI, Beijing has begun to 'look west'—thus progressively shifting its diplomatic priority from the developed economies eastward, to Eurasian and African developing countries, with the MENA offering the converging junctions. The MENA stands at the strategic corridor connecting Central Asia, South Asia, Africa and Europe, and is now China's economic beachhead to expand further its economic presence

¹⁵邓小平文选 [The Selected Works of Deng Xiaoping], Vol. III (Beijing: People's Publisher, 1993), p. 57.

¹⁶詹良材、龔开运 [Liangcai Zhan and Kaiyun Ji], '两伊战争与中伊关系' [The Iran-Iraq war and China-Iran relations], 井冈山大学学报 [Journal of Jinggangshan University] 35(3), (2014), p. 134.

¹⁷纪彭 [Peng Ji], '两伊战争双方都用中国武器' [Both Iran and Iraq used Chinese weapons], 历史参考 [History Reference] 18, (2010), pp. 84–85.

¹⁸Degang Sun and Yahia Zoubir, 'China's response to the revolts in the Arab world: a case of pragmatic diplomacy', *Mediterranean Politics* 19(1), (2014), pp. 2–20.

¹⁹Jon B. Alterman and John W. Garver, *The Vital Triangle: China, the United States, and the Middle East* (Washington, DC: CSIS Press, 2008), p. 19.

²⁰For a similar point, see, James M. Dorsey, *China and the Middle East: Venturing into the Maelstrom*, RSIS Working Paper (Singapore) No. 296, (18 March 2016).

in Africa and Europe. In 2014, the China–Arab trade volume reached a historical record of US\$251.2 billion;²¹ the *China–Arab States Trade Relations 2014 Annual Report* predicted that the China–Arab States trade volume would reach US\$600 billion in ten years.²² China is the Arab World's second largest trading partner and, as of 2016, China had already become the largest trading partner of ten Arab countries and Iran, respectively. In fact, cognizance of the importance of the MENA has become quite evident and is now reflected in Beijing's Arab Policy Paper published in January 2016 which sets the guidelines for China's policies in the region.²³

One of China's most important instruments to actively get involved and exert its influence in MENA affairs is through political involvement; Chinese policymakers needed to undertake such an approach before they could participate in and address salient issues in the region and raise China's political voice and hope to sway those issues in a direction that would serve China's national interests. Two outstanding issues—each raising a number of questions—remain to be discussed about China's present-day quasi-mediation actions in the MENA.

First, how can China reconcile its diplomatic quasi-mediation policy with its long-standing non-interference principle, one of the cornerstones of its foreign policy? What is the motivation for its intervention? Second, why is China selective in implementing its quasi-mediation diplomacy and what are the factors that justify this bias? The tensions in China's foreign policy are already visible in these questions, for China has been unable hitherto to reconcile its five principles of peaceful coexistence with the actions it must take to affirm its great power status.

Conflicts in the MENA can be categorized into three types: the traditional ones, such as the Palestine–Israel conflict, the Western Sahara dispute, the Cyprus issue (which involves Turkey) and the virtually-resolved Iranian nuclear issue (even if President Donald Trump has vowed to undo the July 2015 nuclear agreement, a.k.a. JCPOA); the non-traditional questions, like Somali piracy and the rise of the organization of the 'Islamic State'; and the political tensions within sovereign states, including the Kurdish issue (in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran) and Bahrain's domestic strife. Given that those questions have occupied different positions in China's list of diplomatic priorities, the PRC's government has invested diplomatic resources at different degrees and intervened using different approaches with distinct goals. In the MENA, China contributed, or has attempted to contribute, to the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Sudan and South Sudan, the Iranian nuclear issue, the Palestine–Israel peace process, and in the Libyan, Syrian and Yemeni civil wars. Though often low-key, this role is a further indication of greater Chinese-styled quasi-mediation diplomacy.

Dynamics of China's Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy in the MENA

China's participation in conflict resolution in the MENA is an attempt to play a role in conflict resolution, albeit in a limited capacity. This process has experienced several stages, ranging from negative cognition to positive evaluation, from passive response to hesitant participation, from awaiting openings to building prospects, and from adherence to the dogma of noninterference in others' domestic affairs to cautiously competing for political influence with rival powers. Quasi-mediation diplomacy is a case in point.

China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA in recent years has been driven primarily by necessity, not ideology. The MENA, like sub-Saharan Africa, boasts vast natural resources which China desperately needs for the country's ongoing modernization efforts. For their part, the states in the MENA have faced three major challenges, namely, socioeconomic and political transitions at home; the

²¹'China, Arab States to explore cooperation', *Xinhua English*, (9 September 2015), available at: <http://english.sina.com/china/2015/0910/846625.html> (accessed 15 September 2015).

²²Zhang Zhijie, 'China–Arab States trade volume expected to hit \$600 billion in 10 years', *China.org.cn*, (15 September 2015), available at: http://www.china.org.cn/travel/Ningxia/2015-09/15/content_36590321.htm (accessed 21 September 2015).

²³'China Arab Policy Paper', PRC Ministry of Foreign Affairs, (January 2016), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1331683.shtml (accessed 20 January 2016).

geopolitical reconfiguration of the region, especially after the uprisings of 2010 onward; and an international system in transition, while many multifaceted crises and conflicts proliferate uninterrupted. Therefore, China, perceiving the MENA as a critical emerging market, not just in terms of energy,²⁴ has inevitably had to engage more forcefully in the region in order to defend its interests. Chinese officials assert repeatedly that China never forges military alliances with any country in the region and always keeps friendly relations with all parties,²⁵ and they presume that China is able and will play a fair and just 'mediation' role in at least some of the conflicts. As none of the traditional powers (US, EU, Japan, Russia) or emerging ones (India, Brazil, South Africa) are capable of completely dominating the MENA region and transforming it into their own exclusive 'backyard' or 'sphere of influence', China's policy-makers expect that their quasi-mediation diplomacy might not only help gradually influence regional governance, but can also contribute to the construction of a new model of great power relations. Even before the Arab uprisings, MENA countries had generally pursued a balancing strategy between big powers and come to the conclusion that China's rise might facilitate the settlement of conflicts, thus opening opportunities for the Chinese to conduct quasi-mediation.²⁶ This balancing act of the states in the region has become even more crucial since the MENA uprisings in late 2010, and China's role has been seen in a more positive light. Indisputably, China has accumulated some experience in providing a degree of facilitation in conflict resolution owing to the role it has sought to play in the settlement of disputes in the above-mentioned crises and civil wars. This involvement is laying down the foundations for articulating Beijing's quasi-mediation diplomacy that will inevitably constitute the foundation for the development of genuine mediation diplomacy, as defined earlier.

The start of Chinese quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA dates back to 2002 when the Chinese government set up the special envoy mechanism on the Palestine–Israel issue. This mechanism launched in the region kicked off from little experience; indeed, it seems that the Chinese probed possibilities and put them into practice, developing in the process their own would-be mediation approach. As of 2016, China had nominated five special envoys for the Korean nuclear issue, African Affairs, Middle Eastern Affairs, the Afghan issue and the Syrian conflict, respectively; four of those special envoys are entrusted with MENA questions. Unquestionably, the Korean issue is much more fundamental to China. In this case, the Six-party talks on the North Korean nuclear issue were initially called for and proposed by the Chinese government. In April 2003, China invited the US and North Korean representatives to attend a meeting in Beijing, where the three parties launched a trilateral dialogue. To facilitate the Six-party talks, Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Dai Bingguo carried out rounds of shuttle diplomacy between Russia, South Korea, Japan, North Korea and the US with signed letters from President Hu Jintao to the US and North Korean governments. China's unrelenting mediation diplomacy finally brought the conflicting parties to the negotiation table. On 27–29 August, the first round of the North Korean Six-party talks were held in Beijing.²⁷ This was a case of authentic mediation which the Chinese conducted and thus they engaged fully in the talks because the issue was/is of vital security interest to China. However, one might surmise that, even if the MENA cannot be put on an equal footing with Korea, owing to its salience to China, the MENA is noticeably becoming an important arena within which China might eventually stage bilateral and multilateral relations with other powers and participate in the MENA governance.²⁸

²⁴See, for instance, Sean Foley, 'When oil is not enough: Sino–Saudi relations and Vision 2030', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11(1), (2017), pp. 107–120.

²⁵It should be noted, however, that according to international relations theorist John Mearsheimer, the rise of China will not remain peaceful, especially as regards its core national interests. See, John Mearsheimer, 'Can China rise peacefully?', *The National Interest*, (25 October 2004), available at: <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/can-china-rise-peacefully-10204> (accessed 28 July 2015). In a recent article, using Social Identity Theory, James Jungbok Lee concluded that China's rise will be more peaceful than threatening; see, James Jungbok Lee, 'Will China's rise be peaceful? A social psychological perspective', *Asian Security* 12(1), (2016), pp. 29–52.

²⁶Bahgat Korany and Ali E. Dessouki, *The Foreign Policies of Arab States* (Cairo and New York: The American University in Cairo Press, 2008), pp. 545–596; Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, 'Foreign policy-making in the Middle East: complex realism', in Louise Fawcett, ed., *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), pp. 239–258.

²⁷尚咏梅 [Shang Yongmei], '中国在朝核六方会谈中的地位与作用' [China's Role and Position in the North Korean 'Six-Party Talk'] 东北亚研究 [Journal of Northeast Asian Studies], (4), (2005), pp. 19–24.

²⁸See, for instance, Jin Liangxiang, 'China, EU can cooperate in Middle East', *China.org.cn*, (8 August 2017), available at: http://www.china.org.cn/opinion/201708/08/content_41370289.htm?from=singlemessage&isappinstalled=0 (accessed 17 August 2017).

Indeed, in the last decade, China's political participation in that region has gradually matured, showing flexibility on policy instruments, and becoming more deeply involved in some matters (e.g. the Sudanese problem, Saudi–Iranian discord and the Iranian nuclear controversy) than in others (e.g. Cyprus and Yemen), what a diplomat described as 'smart diplomacy with Chinese characteristics'.²⁹ This inevitably begs the question as to the reasons behind this differentiation.

Four motivating factors for China's involvement are identified in this article: first, the relevance of the questions to China's vital commercial interests; second, the scope of China's influence; third, the degree of great power consensus; and, fourth, the intractability of the crisis settlement. In this article the authors hypothesize that these four factors have determined the depth of China's participation in quasi-mediation.

Relevance to China's Vital Commercial Interests

The more a MENA front-burner issue relates to Chinese core commercial interests, the more likely China will become involved in mediation (in the future) or quasi-mediation in the MENA, as it has acted hitherto. Generally speaking, the reason a third party comes to mediation is largely contingent upon consideration of its own interests;³⁰ in other words, 'third parties may choose to mediate if important interests of their own are at stake'; and 'powerful mediators with self-interested motives for mediating a conflict are more likely than less powerful ones to be able to convince (or oblige) the disputants to make use of their services'.³¹ Nowadays, Chinese commercial interests in the MENA revolve around three concerns: first, securing the free flow of oil, ensuring stable prices of energy and its supply to China; second, keeping the balance of power in the region to prevent any regional and/or outside powers from monopolizing MENA resources; third, keeping peace and stability in the region and preventing political turmoil which could hinder Chinese investments, as has happened in Iraq since 2003, Libya and Syria since 2011, and, to a lesser degree, Yemen since 2015. Yet, China has not participated in any far-reaching mediation role in the conflict zones of the MENA, Libya, Syria and Yemen being perfect illustrations. Commercial interests constitute some of China's core interests which are more pressing and tangible, especially since they pertain to China's continued domestic modernization requirements. When these interests were jeopardized, China mustered its diplomatic resources and initiated quasi-mediation, without however influencing necessarily the course of events. For example, China and Sudan share common energy interests; this is precisely one of the main reasons why China engaged in an advanced type of quasi-mediation diplomacy. The severity of the internal conflicts had driven away the US and other Western countries; the reluctance of Western powers to get involved paved the way for China to become a dominant player in Sudan. China-owned oil fields are mostly in the South, while the pipelines and oil terminals are in the North; the conflict resulted in the blocking of the flow of oil for eight years due to the domestic turmoil in that country. China actively interceded in the dispute in Darfur and made attractive proposals that contributed to the relative peace and stability. In February 2007, President Hu Jintao visited Sudan, talked with President Omar Bashir, and met with First Vice-President Salva Kiir Mayarditand, and Vice-President Ali Osman Mohammed Taha to convey China's position on the matters at hand.³² In May 2007, China initiated the special envoys mechanism on Darfur; Ambassador Liu Guijin made several visits to southern Sudan and neighboring African countries, as well as to Europe. Liu Guijin not only actively communicated with officials from the UN, the African Union, the League of Arab States and the EU, but he also took advantage of China's rotating presidency of the UN Security Council to push for UN Resolution 1,769 that resulted in the agreement between the UN, the African Union and the Sudanese government for an AU–UN 'hybrid operation'. In order to guarantee the deal,

²⁹The term was coined by a senior Chinese diplomat who requested anonymity.

³⁰Bercovitch, *Studies in International Mediation*, p. 32.

³¹Kenneth Kressel, 'Mediation', in Morton Deutsch, Peter T. Coleman and Eric C. Marcus, eds, *The Handbook of Conflict Resolution* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), p. 528.

³²Foreign Policy Research Division, *China Diplomacy 2008* (Beijing: World Affairs Press, 2008), p. 173.

China subsequently contributed 315 peacekeepers to the multidimensional peace operation force to support its go-between endeavor;³³ in 2014, China sent hundreds of additional peacekeeping forces to South Sudan.³⁴ China's facilitation in the two Sudans might serve as an illustration in the multifaceted intervention category for commercial interests. Before the conflict began in December 2013, South Sudan provided 5% of China's oil imports, and China was the largest investor in the oil sector; but, due to the civil war and South Sudan's conflicts with the North, the oil supply had been jeopardized. In 2014, the peace talks among the warring factions in South Sudan were held in the Ethiopian capital Addis Ababa. China became heavily involved, taking a more 'hands-on approach' regarding the issue. As Ma Qiang, Chinese Ambassador to South Sudan, admitted candidly, 'We have huge interests in South Sudan, so we have to make a greater effort to persuade the two sides to stop fighting and agree to a ceasefire'.³⁵ The conflict reached resolution in mid-February 2016, confirmed in April, when President Salva Kiir reinstated rebel leader Riek Machar as first vice president in a unity government, a position he had held in 2013 before the civil war broke out. The political solution, however, was short-lived, as hostilities resumed and Riek Machar went into exile, vowing that he would direct his troops from there. Worse still, the civil war in South Sudan has not abated; according to the United Nations, in February 2017, 100,000 people were suffering from famine while 40% of the population urgently needed food aid. Therefore, China's efforts to intercede in this conflict were rather futile due to the complicated nature of the domestic conditions. The best it was able to achieve has been the preservation of its commercial interests which one might argue was the justification for the intervention all along.

The PRC also has vital investment ventures in Afghanistan which explains why it set in place some quasi-mediation efforts³⁶; Afghanistan is quite important to China's foreign and security policies. In Afghanistan, the Metallurgical Corporation of China has substantial investments, close to US\$4 billion in the country's copper resources. Indeed, since 2014, China has been very active in negotiating separately with the Afghan government, different political factions, as well as the Taliban in an attempt to foster national reconciliation in the war-torn state which also happens to be China's neighbor. On the eve of the 2014 Afghan general election, China's special envoy for Afghan Affairs, Ambassador Sun Yuxi, started shuttle visits and talks with President Hamid Karzai, the candidates Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah, UN officials, and with the US and EU Ambassadors to Afghanistan, among others.³⁷

Following the development of Iran's nuclear crisis, China participated in the '5+1' (UN Permanent Five plus Germany) talks and pushed for the peaceful settlement of the dispute, which resulted in the historic accord signed in July 2015. One of the main reasons for such involvement derives from the necessity of continued access to Iran's oil which serves as one of the lifelines of China's national economy.³⁸ Furthermore, Iran is an important trading partner with which China seeks to develop cooperation in energy projects, infrastructure construction and expanded trade.³⁹ While China played an important role in the nuclear talks, it did not play a mediation part, offering instead a form of 'multilateralism

³³刘鸿武、李新烽 [Liu Hongwu and Li Xinfeng], eds, 全球视野下的达尔富尔问题研究 [Studies on Darfur Issue in Global Dimension] (Beijing: World Affairs, 2008), pp. 21–22.

³⁴'China sending 1,800 peacekeepers to South Sudan', *Voice of America*, (10 September 2014), available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/china-sending-1800-peacekeepers-to-south-sudan/2444809.html> (accessed 10 January 2015).

³⁵Cited in Shannon Tiezzi, 'In South Sudan conflict, China tests its mediation skills', *The Diplomat*, (6 June 2014), available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2014/06/in-south-sudan-conflict-china-tests-its-mediation-skills/> (accessed 25 September 2015).

³⁶See the interesting article, Sudha Ramachandran, 'China's Afghanistan–Pakistan mediation: mission impossible', *Asia Times*, (21 June 2017), available at: <http://www.atimes.com/chinas-afghanistan-pakistan-mediation-mission-impossible/> (accessed 18 August 2017).

³⁷Huang Ao, 'China launched an unprecedented mediation to the Afghan affairs and promise to provide more support to the neighbor', *The Paper.Cn*, (29 July 2014), available at: http://www.thepaper.cn/newsDetail_forward_1258681 (accessed 20 September 2016).

³⁸In June 2015, China imported daily 671,800 barrels of crude oil from Iran. See, 'China's crude oil imports from Iran increase in June', *Reuters/Zawya*, (22 July 2015), available at: http://www.zawya.com/story/Chinas_crude_oil_imports_from_Iran_increase_in_June-ZAWYA20150723050718/ (accessed 22 August 2015).

³⁹Scott Warren Harold and Alireza Nader, *China and Iran: Economic, Political, and Military Relations*, Rand Corporation Occasional Paper, (2012), available at: http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/occasional_papers/2012/RAND_OP351.pdf (accessed 17 June 2014).

with Chinese characteristics'.⁴⁰ Its actions aimed at preserving the commercial interests in Iran, but also cooperating with the Western powers in order to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power while opposing that this be done through force, an option China would have been compelled to veto.

In contrast, China has not gotten deeply involved in the Hamas–Fatah reconciliation and has had little interest in Western Sahara, which Morocco has occupied since November 1975.⁴¹ In this latter case, China has sought to balance its good relations with Morocco, a pro-Western power, and with its long-time friend and 'strategic partner' Algeria, which supports the liberation movement, the POLISARIO Front.⁴² China is Algeria's largest trading partner, and Morocco's second largest trading partner after the European Union; in recent years, trade relations with Morocco have increased exponentially,⁴³ which partly explains China's balanced, guarded position on the conflict. China succeeded in keeping the question of the Western Sahara as a question to be dealt with at the United Nations; its commercial interests with both Algeria and Morocco are substantial enough for China to avoid getting embroiled in a protracted conflict. And, since neither Algeria nor Morocco have made their good relationship with China contingent upon China's alignment on the question, China has remained neutral toward the dispute, a position perceived as 'disappointing' by Algerians who argue that 'we do support China on Tibet and Taiwan, while China remains neutral on Western Sahara even if the question of Tibet and Taiwan is totally different from Western Sahara'.⁴⁴

As to Somalia, in August 2007, China donated US\$300,000 to the African Union to assist with mediation efforts in that civil-war ravaged country; however, it was reluctant to get proactively engaged in the peace process, mostly because at that time Beijing did not yet have any critical interests in the Horn of Africa,⁴⁵ except in Djibouti, where it has built its first overseas military base to protect commercial shipping across the Strait of Aden.⁴⁶

Scope of China's Influence

The stronger China can exert its influence over conflicting parties in the MENA, the more likely it will engage in quasi-mediation diplomacy, but not genuine mediation diplomacy, which is generally as dependent on the capabilities of the mediating state as it is on its will. The neutral third party will be more likely to conduct mediation diplomacy if that state is capable and has sufficient resources available to pressure and exert influence on the conflicting parties.⁴⁷ For example, President Jimmy Carter

⁴⁰Roncevert Ganan Almond, 'China and the Iran nuclear deal: the deal offers some significant and sobering lessons on "multilateralism with Chinese characteristics"', *The Diplomat*, (8 March 2016), available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/03/china-and-the-iran-nuclear-deal/> (accessed 22 August 2015).

⁴¹On the geopolitics of the conflict in Western Sahara, see Yahia H. Zoubir, 'Conflict in Western Sahara', in David Sorenson, ed., *Interpreting the Modern Middle East: Essential Themes* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2010), pp. 303–336.

⁴²In December 2013, China's Foreign Minister Wang Yi said during talks with his Moroccan counterpart that 'China as a permanent member of the Security Council, will continue to play a constructive role and invites parties to pragmatism and flexibility to continue negotiations on the basis of security council resolutions, to achieve a just, lasting and mutually acceptable settlement', *WikiLeaks*, available at: <http://www.wikileaks-forum.com/western-sahara/474/china-for-political-solution-to-western-sahara-conflict/26427/> (accessed 25 October 2014).

⁴³AFP, 'Morocco to launch Chinese industrial city in Tangiers', *Africa News*, (21 March 2017), available at: <http://www.africanews.com/2017/03/21/morocco-to-launch-chinese-industrial-city-in-tangiers/> (accessed 18 August 2017); Ward Vloeberghs, 'Quand le royaume rayonne—La géopolitique marocaine au prisme du commerce extérieur' [*Moroccan geopolitics through foreign trade*], *Confluences Méditerranée* 78, (2011), pp. 157–170.

⁴⁴Author's interview with senior Algerian official, Beijing, 18 October 2016.

⁴⁵Dan Large, 'China's Role in the Mediation and Resolution of Conflict in Africa', Center for Humanitarian Dialogue, OSLO Forum Network of Mediators, (2008), available at: <http://www.osloforum.org/content/chinas-role-mediation-and-resolution-conflict-africa> (accessed 20 September 2017).

⁴⁶Brad Lendon and Steve George, 'China sends troops to Djibouti, establishes first overseas military base', *CNN*, (13 July 2017), available at: <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/07/12/asia/china-djibouti-military-base/index.html> (accessed 17 August 2017); Degang Sun and Yahia H. Zoubir, 'The eagle's nest in the Horn of Africa: US military strategic deployment in Djibouti', *Africa Spectrum* 51(1), (2016), pp. 111–124; Jane Perlez and Chris Buckley, 'China retools its military with a first overseas outpost in Djibouti', *New York Times*, (26 November 2015), available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/27/world/asia/china-military-presence-djibouti-africa.html?_r=0 (accessed 27 November 2015).

⁴⁷Oran R. Young, *The Intermediaries: Third Parties in International Crises* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), pp. 80–90.

succeeded in persuading Egypt and Israel to achieve the Camp David Accords because the US committed to providing economic aid and security guarantees; the two parties were cognizant of the fact that the US was then the only power capable of delivering such resources.⁴⁸ At this stage, it is doubtful whether China is capable and/or willing to devote sufficient resources to pressure and exert influence on any of the current conflicting parties in the MENA. As of today, it is also questionable whether it has any motivation to play that role at all. In fact, China's leaders themselves admit that the country is unable to allocate significant resources to deal with the Middle East's intricate problems.⁴⁹ Here, the Sudanese case provides a good illustration of China's limited impact in resolving some of the complex issues in the region. In the Sudanese crisis, prior to the independence of South Sudan in 2011, China had maintained constructive cooperation relations with the two conflicting parties, exerting enormous influence over both the south-Sudanese irredentist rebellion and the Sudanese state. That influence intensified owing to the arms sales, economic aid and tangible trade cooperation. In May 2007, China established a Special Representative Office on the Darfur issue, and the Representative repeatedly visited Sudan to exert pressure. In 2008, China donated half a million dollars to the Trust Fund for the African Union–UN Joint Mediation Support Team for Darfur, a payment perceived as 'carrot'.⁵⁰ President Hu Jintao visited Sudan and sent Special Envoy Liu Guijin to serve as 'mediator' in the crisis. In 2011, Sudan was divided peacefully into two countries, which was the result of the active influence of outside powers, especially that of China, which played a decisive role. Given China's persuasive participation, in June 2013, South Sudan's Vice President Riek Machar visited Khartoum and met Sudan's First Vice President Ali Osman Taha; this marked the highest-level talks between Juba, South Sudan's capital, and Khartoum since the latter threatened to stop cross-border oil flows.⁵¹ In September 2015, President Omar Hassan al-Bashir paid a visit to Beijing, where he attended China's military parade in Tiananmen Square. Undoubtedly, China's engagement in the conflict derived from its core energy interests and investments as well as the absence of involvement by rival powers.

In Afghanistan, Beijing enjoys political and economic influence, employing its quasi-mediation in the country's internal conflict. China is Afghanistan's largest neighbor and trading partner. On 31 October 2014, the fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan was held at the Diaoyutai State Guesthouse in Beijing. Foreign Ministers or senior representatives from 14 regional member states, 16 supporting states outside the region, 12 international and regional organizations, and four guests of the host country attended the conference, signifying that Beijing attaches great significance to Afghan political stability. Premier Li Keqiang attended the opening ceremony and expounded on the five propositions of the Chinese side about resolving the Afghan issue, namely, 'to firmly adhere to the friendly policy towards Afghanistan, support Afghanistan to promote peaceful reconciliation and reconstruction, help Afghanistan with capacity building and support Afghanistan to integrate into the regional cooperation'.⁵² China facilitated talks not only with government officials and candidates, but it also hosted visits by Taliban delegations. China's decision to play the role of go-between seemed to indicate a foreign policy turn to assert its role as regional leader, but also to prove that China can safely do better in Afghanistan than the US.⁵³ Initiated by China, the China–US–Pakistan–Afghanistan Quadrilateral Coordination Group on Afghan security was founded in early 2016, increasing China's political influence. From 2001 to 2014, Beijing's economic aid to Kabul reached approximately US\$500

⁴⁸ Marieke Kleiboer, *The Multiple Realities of International Mediation* (Boulder, CO and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998), pp. 89–118.

⁴⁹ 牛新春 [Niu Xinchun], '中国在中东的利益与影响力分析' [An Analysis of China's Interests in and Influence over the Middle East], 现代国际关系 [Contemporary International Relations], 28(10), 2013, p. 52.

⁵⁰ Large, 'China's Role in the Mediation and Resolution of Conflict in Africa', p. 39.

⁵¹ 'South Sudan's vice president to visit Khartoum', *China Daily*, (30 June 2013), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/xinhua/2013-06-30/content_9455452.html (accessed 4 October 2015).

⁵² Ministry of Foreign Affairs, PRC, 'The Fourth Foreign Ministerial Conference of the Istanbul Process on Afghanistan Held in Beijing', (1 November 2014), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1207147.shtml (accessed 20 September 2015).

⁵³ Jeremy Page, Margherita Stancati and Nathan Hodge, 'As US exits, China takes on Afghanistan role', *Wall Street Journal*, (9 February 2015), available at: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/as-u-s-exits-china-takes-on-afghanistan-role-1423539002> (accessed 15 January 2016).

million, which is an important vehicle for Beijing to exert political influence on Kabul. Of course, US gradual withdrawal from Afghanistan made it possible (and safer) for China to pursue such an approach.

Level of Great Power Consensus

The higher the great power consensus over hot-spot issues in the MENA, the more likely China will opt for quasi-mediation diplomacy. China's decision not to actively mediate in a MENA conflict does not only hinge upon the fact that the conflict does not affect its core interests, but also when the international community is unable to resolve the issue at hand. In recent years, owing to the rise of its national strength, international expectations on China have risen concomitantly.⁵⁴ As a major power and one of the five UN Security Council permanent members, China is expected to assume more international responsibility, to provide public goods, and to assist in maintaining international law and order. Since President Xi came to power in 2012, the policymakers in his administration have shown a stronger desire to achieve 'the Chinese Dream' of national rejuvenation at home, and to position China as a confident global power rather than a mere reluctant regional power. However, when or if there is no great power consensus, China will still virtually always abstain from mediating in order to avoid failure which might affect its image and undermine its role as a major power to reckon with.

In the MENA, the protracted conflict in Palestine–Israel is paramount and attracts world attention; and the conflict can also serve as the barometer of the MENA political landscape. Being fully cognizant of the high great power consensus about the 'two-state-solution' to the Palestine–Israel issue and aware that the overall situation in the MENA could explode over that issue, China has decided since 2002 to dispatch special envoys to address the question, seeking to facilitate talks between Palestinians and Israelis, a cautious facilitation which Chinese policymakers believe could help in moving the peace process forward. In 2013, President Xi Jinping received Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu almost simultaneously. President Xi submitted a four-point proposal on the solution to this conflict: the erection of an independent state of Palestine; achievement of the Middle East peace process through dialogue; adherence to the 'land for peace' principle; and commitment of the international community to guarantee the peace process.⁵⁵ Clearly, until President Trump came to office in 2017, there had been great power consensus that the 'two-state-solution' must materialize, for, without it, the MENA will never experience permanent peace and stability. But, China's vital commercial interests in this dispute are so limited that its seeming diplomatic engagement is merely a response to the international community's expectation rather than to any necessity to act to defend the PRC's core interests. Chinese officials are aware that they have little chance to succeed in a conflict that not even the US has been able to resolve. Furthermore, Israelis will not allow any power other than the US to play any role in the conflict. The last Netanyahu visit to China in March 2017, and the Abbas trip to China in August 2017 are the best illustrations as the talks with the Chinese focused mostly on commercial interests around the 'Belt and Road Initiative',⁵⁶ which might provide, from China's perspective, unique channels to influence the region through appealing to economic incentives.

With respect to the Iranian nuclear issue, there was a high level of great power consensus too, particularly during the Obama administration; China participated actively in the '5+1' mechanism to urge dialogue and negotiation on the controversial Iranian program and sought resolution through multilateral mechanisms under the UN mandate. On 16 April 2008, the directors in the foreign ministries of the six countries and the Director General for External Relations of the Council of the European Union held

⁵⁴Yoram Evron, 'China's diplomatic initiatives in the Middle East: the quest for a great power role in the region', *International Relations* 31(2), (2015), pp. 125–144.

⁵⁵President Abbas denies meeting Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu in Beijing', *Xinjing Daily*, (7 May 2013), available at: <http://www.chinanews.com/gj/2013/05-07/4791801.shtml> (accessed 5 October 2015).

⁵⁶Roie Yellinek, 'Netanyahu's China visit', *BESA Center Perspectives*, Paper No. 434, (27 March 2017), available at: <https://besacenter.org/perspectives-papers/netanyahu-china-visit/> (accessed 5 May 2017); see also, 'Israeli Prime Minister Headed the Largest Business Delegation to Visit China', *News.China*, (20 March 2017), available at: <http://news.china.com/domesticgd/10000159/20170320/30339765.html> (accessed 28 March 2017).

a meeting in Shanghai to discuss the resumption of negotiations on the Iranian nuclear program; and, in April 2012, the meeting of the '5+1' was held in Istanbul, Turkey during which China proposed again to address Iran's nuclear program through diplomatic means within the UN framework.⁵⁷ In April 2015, an interim agreement was reached in Geneva, Switzerland, among the six countries' representatives on the Iranian nuclear program. At last, in July 2015, a historic deal (JCPOA) was signed between the parties, partly due to perceived Chinese relative neutrality and constructive engagement during the negotiations.⁵⁸ Indeed, the Chinese played a quasi-mediation role between the other powers at the table, through a balancing among all the actors involved.

In contrast, given that the level of great power consensus is quite low with respect to the territorial dispute between the United Arab Emirates and Iran,⁵⁹ China has hitherto completely abstained from offering any type of intercession between these two states. China's non-involvement here does not affect its core interests with either state. But, in contrast, siding with Russia, China vetoed UNSC resolutions on the Syrian crisis seven times, the most recent in February 2017,⁶⁰ unprecedented actions historically. Yet, China refrained from mediating between the Assad regime and the opposition parties because Russia, the West, Turkey, Iran and the GCC countries failed to reach consensus even after the meeting held in Astana, Kazakhstan in January 2017 and that of the trilateral commission (Russia, Iran and Turkey) the following month. The UN-backed peace talks in Geneva in late February 2017 were also unsuccessful. Thus, failure could not be blamed on China given that it was not party to the thorny mediation process.

Intractability of the Crisis Settlement

The easier a hot-spot dispute in the MENA can be settled, the more likely China will get involved in quasi-mediation diplomacy. In the past decade, the degree of China's enthusiasm in settling hot-spot issues in the MENA has been conversely proportional to Chinese policymakers' assessment of the difficulties in the settlement of the dispute. Generally speaking, China would less likely expend diplomatic resources and engage in quasi-mediation if the said issue is intractable, and vice versa. For example, in 2008, after a Khartoum-backed rebel attack to overthrow Chadian President Idriss Déby, Ambassador Liu Guijin adopted a careful attitude, insisting that China would not intercede in the proxy conflict between Khartoum and Ndjamena, capital of Chad, due to the complexity of the fight; he simply urged both parties engaged in that proxy war to observe the rules of good neighborliness.⁶¹ Yet, in the wake of the outbreak of the Sudanese crisis in 2010, the central government in Khartoum agreed to hold a referendum on South Sudan's independence, which greatly increased the chances for the success of China's quasi-mediation effort and therefore allowed Special Envoy Liu Guijin to conduct frequent rounds of facilitation between the parties.

Syria is another example in which Beijing was detached and reluctant to engage in any type of meaningful mediation. In December 2015, Syrian Vice Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualeem came to Beijing, where he declared for the first time that Damascus was willing to abide by UNSC 2,254 resolution, and talk with Syrian opposition parties. In January 2016, Khaled Khoja, Chairman of the National Coalition of Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces (NCSROF) visited Beijing, where he proclaimed that the opposition parties would engage in negotiation as well.⁶² China indicated that it

⁵⁷Steven Erlanger, 'As nuclear talks with Iran restart, new hopes for deal', *New York Times*, (12 April 2012), available at: http://www.nytimes.com/2012/04/14/world/europe/iran-resumes-talks-over-its-nuclear-program.html?_r=0 (accessed 14 November 2014).

⁵⁸Author's interview with Iranian scholar, close to the government, Tehran, August 2016.

⁵⁹See Khalid S. Al-Nahyan, *The Three Islands: Mapping the UAE–Iran Dispute* (London: RUSI, 2013).

⁶⁰On 28 February 2017, China vetoed a UN resolution aimed at imposing sanctions on Syria for the alleged use of chemical weapons. Chinese Ambassador to the UN Liu Jieyi stated at the council following the vote that inquiries on the utilization of chemical weapons are still ongoing and 'it is too early to reach a final conclusion'. Cited in, 'Security Council fails to adopt resolution on Syria sanctions over chemical weapons', *China Daily*, (1 March 2017), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/2017-03/01/content_28387253.htm (accessed 2 March 2017).

⁶¹Large, 'China's Role in the Mediation and Resolution of Conflict in Africa', p. 40.

⁶²王毅会见叙利亚反对派全国联盟主席' ['Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi meets the chairman of Syrian opposition party NCSROF], 人民日报 [*People's Daily*], (8 January 2016), p. 3.

could play a more active role in the Syrian crisis in order to facilitate talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups.⁶³ This was the first time China had overtly offered to act as go-between, and even nominated in 2016 Ambassador Xie Xiaoyan as Special Envoy for Syrian issues.

By contrast, China did not participate in the mediation between Iran and the United Arab Emirates on the disputed island, or between Saudi Arabia and Iran, or between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, nor did it even partake in quasi-mediation between various armed factions in Somalia, or in the dispute over Western Sahara, mainly because these crises seem intractable and the parties in the conflict are unlikely to reach compromise in the short term.

In the following section, the authors provide more examples to analyze the different layers of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA.

Four Categories of China's Quasi-Mediation Diplomacy in the MENA

In addition to sub-Saharan Africa, the MENA is the second region with the most intractable hot-spot disputes; it is both a conundrum and a priority for global governance, which includes the intermittent Arab–Israeli 'peace process', territorial disputes, WMD proliferation, ethnic and sectarian conflicts, and violent extremism. The dramatic change in the MENA which has unfolded since late 2010 has made social, sectarian and ethnic disputes even more complex, Syria and Yemen being good illustrations. The ongoing civil wars in Libya, Syria, Yemen and Iraq are grave concerns in the MENA with global repercussions; this explains why the US, the EU, Russia, the UN, the League of Arab States, the African Union (Libya being an African country), the Gulf Cooperation Council and the MENA states have engaged in mediation diplomacy to restore stability in the region, prevent conflicts from escalating, enhance some of the involved states' international influence⁶⁴ and enable MENA issues to provide an opportune arena for big-power relations. China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA can be broken down into four tiers: multifaceted intervention; proactive involvement; limited intercession; and indirect participation.

Multifaceted Intervention

The notion of multifaceted intervention here refers to China's huge investment of diplomatic resources whereby Beijing seeks to partake in the agenda of the negotiation, including the sending of special envoys and tackling hot-spot disputes to influence the outcome. China's core interests are directly affected by these hot-spot concerns: it maintains good relations with all conflicting parties; the international community pins high hopes on the settlement of the issues; and, hot-spot problems are relatively easy to manage. In the process of those types of mediation, the Chinese government has paid special attention, and the top policymakers, including the president, premier and ministers, often directly participate in some types of facilitations and/or designed negotiation proceedings to enable the warring parties to reach compromise in a short time, or at least in preventing the crisis from escalating.

In crisis management, China often approaches the conflicting parties with nudging and assistance, and its overall methodology is similar to the Western-styled 'carrot and stick' tactic. On the one hand, China provides all parties with the necessary economic aid, skewed trade policy in their favor, tariff reduction on the import of commodities, invites the leaders of all the parties to visit China, and, at times, provides military aid in order to help reach agreement between the conflicting parties. On the other hand, when necessary, China exerts leverage through the cutting of economic assistance and limiting high-level exchanges, actions whose objective is to signal to the conflicting parties that they need to reach agreement in a short period of time. However, since its core sovereign and security interests are

⁶³Li Xiaokun, 'China takes on mediation role', *China Daily* (English Edition), (24 December 2015), available at: http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-12/24/content_22792453.htm (accessed 29 December 2016).

⁶⁴This would be applicable to Qatar, for instance. See, Mehran Kamrava, *Qatar: Small State, Big Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).

not affected, China would refrain from proactively mediating between the conflicting parties, as it did on the North Korean nuclear issue, for instance.

Proactive Involvement

Proactive involvement refers to Beijing investing a great deal of diplomatic resources, which includes sending special envoys to participate in the settlement of hot-spot disputes, usually with the participation of Chinese leaders interceding in the dispute. In contrast to the category of multifaceted intervention, in proactive involvement, China usually avoids giving the impression of weighing in or of leading the negotiations, nor does it set agendas or provide economic aid or exert political pressure to sway the discussions. In this category, China supports the resolution of the conflict, but abstains from devoting diplomatic resources to speed up the process of conflict resolution or setting any expectations for a short-term outcome. For example, China's special envoys to Middle East Affairs have conducted shuttle diplomacy for years. Wang Shijie, Sun Bigan, Wu Sike and Gong Xiaosheng, and former and incumbent special envoys, have often shuttled between Palestine, Israel, Egypt and Jordan in the hope of promoting peace and encouraging negotiation without, however, engaging in genuine mediation. China simply seeks to maintain a balanced policy on the Palestine–Israel peace process: on the one hand, it opposes Israel's pursuit of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and, on the other hand, it calls for Palestinian militants to renounce all forms of violence and recourse to terrorism.⁶⁵ In the first Arab Policy Paper, China declares that it 'supports the Middle East peace process and the establishment of an independent state of Palestine with full sovereignty, based on the pre-1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital'.⁶⁶ During President Abbas's visit to Beijing in August 2017, President Xi outlined a new roadmap for the Palestine–Israeli conflict, i.e. advancing the two-state solution based on 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as the capital of a new Palestinian state; upholding 'the concept of common, comprehensive, cooperative and sustainable security'; immediately ending Israeli settlement building, taking immediate measures to prevent violence against civilians and calling for an early resumption of peace talks; coordinating international efforts to set forth 'peace-promoting measures that entail joint participation at an early date'; and, promoting peace through development and cooperation between the Palestinians and Israelis.⁶⁷ This being said, the declaratory position does not represent mediation or signify that China will commit to any meaningful mediation diplomacy in the conflict in spite of the various proposals that China occasionally puts forth, such as the one in July 2017.⁶⁸ In fact, a good explanation for such a proposal is that 'China might be maneuvering for some diplomatic leeway. It supposedly reflects Beijing's willingness to share the burden of international stabilization, show its support for the Palestinian cause, and demonstrate BRI's potential to promote peace and development'.⁶⁹ In fact, as a Chinese official put it, 'In advancing the Belt and Road Initiative, we will not retread the old path of games between foes. Instead we will create a new model of cooperation and mutual benefit'.⁷⁰

Limited Intercession

Limited intercession here refers to a low-level type of quasi-mediation in which China devotes insignificant diplomatic resources, participating lightly in the context of mediation directed by others, doing

⁶⁵Chris Zambelis, 'China's Palestine policy', *China Brief* 9(5), (2009), pp. 10–11.

⁶⁶'China's Arab Policy Paper', *Xinhua*, (13 January 2016), http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2016-01/13/c_135006619.htm (accessed 21 September 2017).

⁶⁷'China rallies support for four-point Israeli–Palestinian peace plan', *The Associated Press*, (1 August 2017), available at: <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.804541> (accessed 10 August 2017).

⁶⁸Yoram Evron, 'China has a new Middle East peace plan—what's new in Beijing's latest proposal and what does it tell us about China's views and intentions concerning the region?', *The Diplomat*, (14 August 2017), available at: <http://thediplomat.com/2017/08/china-has-a-new-middle-east-peace-plan/> (accessed 14 August 2017).

⁶⁹*Ibid.*

⁷⁰Cited in, 'China's "Belt and Road" offers Middle East opportunities galore', *AMEinfo*, (19 June 2017), available at: <http://ameinfo.com/money/economy/chinas-belt-road-offers-middle-east-opportunities-galore/> (accessed 17 August 2017).

so solely to mark its presence and, when it does, it carries out the facilitation between parties at a very modest level. Generally speaking, those hot-spot issues are secondary to China's core interests or even commercial interests; the conflicting parties are not pliable to China's influence; the level of great power consensus is low; and, a short-term peaceful solution is unavailable. In those cases, Chinese special envoys might be sent temporarily and symbolically on a case-by-case basis.

In January 2016, Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab countries, namely, Sudan, the UAE, Bahrain, Somalia and Djibouti, severed diplomatic relations with Iran; this happened just before President Xi Jinping undertook a tour of the Middle East. In the same month (6–8 January) Vice Foreign Minister Zhang Ming visited Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran, urging both Riyadh and Tehran to show restraint, engage in negotiations and ease regional tensions.⁷¹ However, Beijing's facilitation endeavor has been insignificant: China's Arab Policy Paper does not even refer to mediation or conflict resolution, and Xi only discussed bilateral relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran, respectively, without offering any concrete roadmap for reconciliation between Riyadh and Tehran, nor did he offer to engage in genuine mediation between the conflicting parties.

In the category of limited intercession, China's top leaders seldom participate in the process, preferring to send lower-level officials or staff members from the Chinese embassies, or invite the conflicting parties to come to Beijing. For example, during the unexpected Libyan Crisis, following the visit of Mahmoud Jibril, head of Libya's Executive Committee of the ruling National Transitional Council (NTC) to Beijing on 21–22 June 2011, China initiated limited intercession between the Qaddafi government and the NTC.⁷² In December 2016, it was reported that China received a delegation of Houthis, the Yemeni rebels, which suggests that China might attempt to be a careful broker on Yemeni issues.

After Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain broke diplomatic relations with Qatar on 5 June 2017, China dispatched to the UAE and Qatar Deng Li, Director of the West Asia and North Africa Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Li Chengwen, the Ambassador for China–Arab States Cooperation Forum Affairs also visited Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain, as Beijing engaged in a kind of 'shuttle diplomacy'. Again, in July 2017, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with the visiting Qatari Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani and called on all sides to exercise restraint, avoid further deterioration and escalation of the situation, and conduct face-to-face talks as soon as possible, so as to convey a positive signal of initiating a political and diplomatic settlement, to renew the confidence of the outside world toward the GCC.⁷³ In this kind of involvement, China showed a preference for expounding its general position and principles of conflict resolution rather than laying down a timetable or venue for mediation. These are cost-free pronouncements that do not commit China to any real involvement.

Indirect participation

The indirect participation, in China's case, means that China would not take part proactively, but participates indirectly in the crisis management that international organizations, such as the United Nations, initiate. This is also a case where the burning issues are less significant to China's core interests; in this scenario, China and the conflicting parties have little strategic confidence in each other; China can do little to influence the parties; the international community, especially outside powers, are unable to reach consensus; or, the problems are long-term and intractable and whose resolution cannot happen in the short term. For example, China did not participate in the mediations in Lebanon, Somalia, Bahrain and the territorial dispute between Iran and the United Arab Emirates, but instead played an indirect

⁷¹'Chinese Vice Foreign Minister Visits Saudi Arabia', China's Foreign Ministry, (9 January 2015), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/web/wjbxw_673019/t1330617.shtml (accessed 22 September 2017).

⁷²'Libyan rebel leader visits Beijing', *China.org.cn*, (21 June 2011), available at: http://www.china.org.cn/world/2011-06/21/content_22824757.htm (accessed 25 March 2014).

⁷³Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 'Wang Yi Meets with Foreign Minister of Qatar: Talk about Gulf Crisis Again', (20 July 2017), available at: http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/mfa_eng/zxxx_662805/t1479573.shtml (accessed 12 August 2017).

Table 1. Differentiating mediation from quasi-mediation diplomacy.

	Mediation diplomacy	Quasi-mediation diplomacy
Mediator's interests involved	Security and strategic interests	Commercial and political/diplomatic interests
Attitudes of mediators	Proactive	Selective on case-by-case basis
Positions	Dominating	Participating
Roles of mediators	Leading	Following
Mediation process	Agenda-setting	Agenda-revising
Resources that mediators commit to	Major resources	Minor resources
Primary goals	Conflict resolution	Conflict de-escalation

role via the UN or the UNSC. This is generally a disinterested category of diplomacy. In this scenario, Chinese diplomats usually divide the MENA conflict resolution into two stages: crisis management and post-conflict reconstruction. In the first stage, China remains inactive due to the high risk, strong unpredictability and heavy demand for diplomatic investments; it shows some interest in the second stage only when/if investment opportunities, stronger predictability and lower risk are virtually guaranteed.⁷⁴

Table 2 shows that there are different types and levels in China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA, indicating the Chinese pragmatic and flexible diplomacy. The so-called nonintervention principle can be reinterpreted by the Chinese themselves according to their specific needs. The dynamics of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA are determined by the relevance to China's core interests, scope of China's influence, level of great power consensus and the intractability of the crisis settlement. China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA is hard to define definitively because it still is in an evolving learning curve and has yet to materialize into authentic mediation diplomacy.

Conclusion

The MENA will inevitably become a more crucial part of China's proclaimed 'Belt and Road Initiative'. China's quasi-mediation in the MENA is a key component of her multidimensional exchanges, which is vital for the enhancement of Beijing's protection of its overseas interests, shaping its image as a 'responsible power', extending its soft power and consolidating its rivalry with other powers. Different from the preceding one, China's new leadership appears more assertive, forceful and proactive in diplomatic practice; thus, China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA will inexorably, albeit selectively, demonstrate those same characteristics. During Abbas's visit to Beijing in August 2017, President Xi proposed a 'China–Palestine–Israel tripartite dialogue mechanism' and proclaimed that Beijing would hold a seminar for Israeli and Palestinian 'peace activists' sometime in late 2017.⁷⁵

China has so far not yet engaged in genuine mediation in the MENA. However, its quasi-mediation has covered hot-spot issues which underline the growing necessity of this emerging power to demonstrate its capabilities, including mediation. China might in the long run initiate mediation among the MENA countries to address their territorial and resource disputes, e.g. between Israel and Palestine, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, or between Iran and the United Arab Emirates should China's interests be at stake. At the moment, however, its quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA serves as a training ground for impending opportunities.

Since President Xi came to power in 2012, China has sought to play a more active role in bridging the gaps between different conflicting parties through quasi-mediation diplomacy, a safer approach than formal mediation. China often claims to be different from the US, Europe and Russia, pointing out that it has not colonized any country in the MENA (or elsewhere for that matter), nor has it left a 'historic burden' there. The claim is that China has no intention of spreading its religion or ideology either. In addition, the Chinese highlight that 中庸 [*zhongyong*] (doctrine of the mean, center and unvarying) emphasizes eclecticism, impartiality, detachment and noninterference in the domestic politics of other

⁷⁴Authors' interviews with Chinese diplomats in Beijing, 9 March 2016.

⁷⁵China rallies support for four-point Israeli–Palestinian peace plan', *The Associated Press*.

Table 2. The four tiers of China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA.

MENA crisis	Four tiers	Relevance to China's vital commercial interests	Scope of China's influence	Level of great power consensus	Intractability of the crisis settlement
Sudan/South Sudan/Darfur issues	Multifaceted intervention	Vital	Major	High	Moderate*
Afghan conflict	Multifaceted intervention	Vital	Major	Medium	Significant
Iranian nuclear issue	Proactive involvement	Vital	Medium	High	Significant
Palestinian–Israeli conflict	Proactive involvement	Vital	Medium	High	Significant
Libyan civil war	Limited intercession	Average	Minimal	High	Significant
Syrian crisis	Limited intercession	Average	Minimal	High	Significant
Yemeni crisis	Limited intercession	Average	Minimal	High	Moderate
Saudi–Iranian discord	Limited intercession	Average	Medium	Low	Significant
Saudi–UAE diplomatic dispute with Qatar	Limited intercession	Average	Minimal	Low	Significant
Somali crisis	Indirect participation	Average	Minimal	Medium	Significant
Cyprus issue	Indirect participation	Minimal	Minimal	Low	Significant
Western Sahara issue	Indirect participation	Minimal	Minimal	Low	Significant
Iran–UAE island dispute	Indirect participation	Minimal	Medium	Medium	Significant
Lebanese issue	Indirect participation	Minimal	Minimal	Low	Significant
Hamas–Fatah conflict	Indirect participation	Minimal	Minimal	Minimal	Significant
Bahraini crisis	Indirect participation	Minimal	Minimal	High	Moderate

Note: *The conflict abated once the Khartoum government agreed to allow South Sudan to hold a referendum on independence. But the domestic problems in independent South Sudan, between Sudan and South Sudan, and in Darfur required the allocation of resources for issues which were difficult to solve through mediation.

countries, which should be more attractive to most MENA countries that suffered from the partiality of the former colonial powers or from the US, Israel's primary ally. Chinese officials believe that their balanced policies in quasi-mediation diplomacy will also be conducive to the improvement of China's international discourse—a more persuasive one—to increase the country's 'moral appeal' and political influence, and will therefore strengthen China's overall diplomacy, particularly when the US and European powers are now more engaged in their respective domestic issues.

Chinese officials repeat ad nauseam that they will only put forward what they perceive to be constructive resolutions, sometimes individually and occasionally in concert with others,⁷⁶ such as the European Union. They appear to be more patient than their Western counterparts and usually advance principles and use persuasion, rather than pressure and coercion, which, they suggest, are more helpful in reaching agreement. China's quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA gives the appearance of being increasingly more sophisticated and might in fact enhance its image as a responsible state, thus increasing the country's soft power.

This being said, China's quasi-mediation has its downsides. First, in spite of its increasing importance, China's engagement in the MENA is relatively new and has only recently become part of China's general diplomatic priorities. The MENA still stands far behind China's relations with the great powers and even behind sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America. Thus, the diplomatic resources that China has devoted to its diplomacy in the MENA are quite limited; the unique role that the MENA can play in extending China's strategic opportunity is only now being appreciated to its just value. In the past, Chinese leaders had failed to perceive the area from a strategic perspective or were apprehensive about being dragged into the seemingly intractable conflicts in the volatile MENA region. In January 2016, President Xi's belated visit to Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Iran came after Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe had visited ten Middle Eastern countries,⁷⁷ suggesting a more assertive shift in China's policy in the region to offset Japan's policies.

Second, there is no domestic consensus on the necessity for mediation diplomacy. In the recent past, some Chinese academics and politicians concluded that the MENA hot-spot issues are so complicated and intractable that China should not waste diplomatic resources, and that engaging in genuine mediation diplomacy might prove costly and useless. But, others stress that those issues might represent a new field for the traditional powers, namely, the US, the EU and Russia, but also for China. This, they argue, could offer both traditional and emerging powers the opportunity to boost a more stable, strategic cooperation.

Third, by adhering to nonalignment and 'zero-enemy' policy to avert creating foes, China has lacked reliable allies in the MENA, and rarely has she invested heavily in advancing achievable countermeasures for regional conflict resolution. Due to the limited empowerment in the domestic hierarchy, and even marginalization in power-sharing, China's Foreign Ministry could hardly implement active mediation diplomacy,⁷⁸ not least because the role of the Foreign Ministry has been marginalized.⁷⁹

In short, China is a relatively new player in the region, proceeding as if 'treading on thin ice'; its quasi-mediation diplomacy in the MENA conflicts is a process of gradual transformation, a process of continuous learning, adjustments and accommodation. China appears to be putting forth what it perceives as more balanced and reachable propositions to transform the existing international system. However, becoming a great power necessitates more than intentions, but real actions. As an observer pointed out,

⁷⁶Degang Sun and Yahia H. Zoubir, 'China's economic diplomacy towards the Arab countries: challenges ahead?', *Journal of Contemporary China* 24(95), (2015), p. 904.

⁷⁷Jingdong Yuan, 'China's Middle East policy faces long-term challenge from continuing turmoil', *World Politics Review*, (2 December 2013), available at: <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13412/china-s-middle-east-policy-faces-long-term-challenge-from-continuing-turmoil> (accessed 2 September 2015); Jon B. Alterman, 'China in the Middle East', Statement before the US–China Economic and Security Review Commission, (6 June 2013), available at: https://csis.org/files/attachments/ts130606_alterman.pdf (accessed 20 March 2014).

⁷⁸Authors' interview with a former Chinese Ambassador to the Middle East, Shanghai, 4 December 2015.

⁷⁹Jing Sun, 'Growing diplomacy, retreating diplomats—how the Chinese foreign ministry has been marginalized in foreign policy-making', *Journal of Contemporary China* 26(105), (2016), pp. 419–433.

Ultimately ..., China will have to develop a strategic vision that outlines foreign and defense policies it needs to put in place to protect its expanding strategic, geopolitical, economic, and commercial interests in the Middle East and North Africa; its role and place in the region as a rising superpower in the region; and its relationship and cooperation with the United States in managing, if not resolving conflict.⁸⁰

One should add, that this also necessitates that China engage in genuine mediation diplomacy rather than limit herself to quasi-mediation diplomacy if she wishes to achieve her growing global interests.

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⁸⁰James Dorsey, 'China and the Middle East: venturing into the maelstrom', *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies* 11(1), (2017), pp. 1–14.

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